Theories of case

By Miriam Butt


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So she began: ‘O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool? I am very tired of swimming about here, O Mouse!’ (Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen in her brother’s Latin Grammar, ‘A mouse – of a mouse – to a mouse – a mouse – O mouse!’ [Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, p. 28]

That is the way Miriam Butt begins her book. Apparently, she felt that the quote fits her introduction to case theory within grammatical traditions (Latin grammar is one) and their relationship to various notions of case within modern theoretical linguistics. In her introduction to the book, Butt states “...several issues must be dealt with. One is the issue of what “case” really means and what language phenomena should be considered case. Another is the question as to which historically motivated assumptions have served to form our current notion of case” (Chapter 1, p. 1). In dealing with grammatical traditions, she primarily discusses the Greek and Roman tradition, but does some comparison with other traditions, e.g. Indian and Arabic (Chapter 2 Foundational Perspectives).

In her overview, Butt explains that her book is written primarily from a syntactic point of view though she does discuss some semantic and morphological issues. She has chosen three guiding themes for her comparison of the “case perspective” of syntactic theories: semantic roles, grammatical relations, and the overt appearance of case. She has classified a number of the most widely known current linguistic theories on the basis of their perspectives and combined them in chapters titled to reveal those perspectives: Grammatical Relations (Chapter 3), Structural Case (Chapter 4), Linking Theories (Chapter 5), The Ergative Dragon (Chapter 6), Semantics of Case (Chapter 7), and More Theories Great and Small (Chapter 8). In each chapter, she uses illustrative data that have been used by the various theories to support their claims. She also illustrates and discusses the formalism used by each theory.

In Chapter 3, Grammatical Relations, Butt introduces the idea that abstract syntactic concepts mediate between the lexical semantics of a verb and the expression of case. She discusses the concept of the active-to-passive transformation as originally developed by Harris and Chomsky and compares it to the Arabic tradition that explicitly related this type of derivation to case. This
discussion is followed by a section on case grammar (Fillmore) and thematic roles (TG). In this chapter, she also includes a description of the core ideas of Relational Grammar. One of the main claims of the theory is that the grammatical relations, subject, direct object and indirect object, are primitives of linguistic theory and so need not be defined. According to Butt, case is not accorded a formal role within RG; instead RG implicitly assumes a relationship between overt case marking and grammatical relations. Later she says: “The lack of generalizations about overt case marking continues to be true for some syntactic theories (e.g. GB/Minimalism, Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Combinatory Categorical Grammar), whereas others have formulated explicit theories of linking to determine the interrelationship between case, grammatical relations, thematic roles and clausal semantics” (p. 38).

Chapter 4 is a fairly thorough presentation of what Butt considers to be the basic approach to case and valency within the linguistic tradition represented by Government-Binding (GB) and the more recent versions of the theory, namely the Minimalist Program (MP). The topics she covers are in sections that she has titled: The Basic Architecture, Thematic Roles, Category Neutral Representations: X’ Syntax, The VP-internal subject hypothesis, Case and Agreement, D-Structure, Theta-Theory, and Structural Case.

Butt confesses that the literature in this tradition is vast and that there is little consensus on particular analyses of language data. Considering these facts, she has done an exceptional job of reviewing the literature and then describing and illustrating the particular parts of the theoretical tradition that are related to the guiding themes of her book, semantic roles, grammatical relations, and the overt appearance of case. Although the technical apparatus and some of the guiding ideas have changed, Butt believes that many of the fundamental principles established within GB with respect to the licensing of case, the interaction between case and agreement and the representation of thematic roles and grammatical relations continue to be accepted and have been implemented within MP.

In Chapter 5, Linking Theories, Butt describes syntactic theories that “link” predicate-argument structures to syntactic representations. According to her, some of the fundamental ideas that are the basic building blocks of linking theories are predicate-argument structure in relation to thematic relations, lexical decomposition, and proto-roles. She discusses Kiparsky’s theory of case, Wunderlich’s Lexical-Decomposition Grammar, and LFG’s Mapping Theory. In Chapter 6, she discusses Role and Reference Grammar by comparing the linking concepts within the theory to those presented in this chapter.

Butt traces the notation for the representation of predicate-argument structures to logical formulae. Generative Grammar, Chomsky in particular, developed the notion that argument structure and thematic roles could be a level of representation that mediated between syntax and semantics. Butt indicates that others then took that notion to develop various types of linking theories.

She uses the work of Ostler (1979, Case linking: A theory of case and verb diathesis applied to Classical Sanskrit) and Jackendoff (1976, “Toward an Explanatory Semantic Representation”) to describe the relationship between lexical decomposition and linking. She says that, in his work
on Sanskrit, Ostler introduced the term “linking”, and brought together Fillmore’s Case Grammar and Jackendorf’s ideas on lexical decomposition.

In describing the notion of proto-roles, Butt begins by discussing Dowty’s influential paper “Thematic proto-roles and argument selection” which appeared in Language 67(3) in 1991. According to Butt, Dowty proposed just two roles, proto-Agent and Proto-Patient that are characterized by a list of entailments. She quotes from Dowty’s paper to illustrate the relationship that he claimed between proto-role entailments and the grammatical relations, subject and object. He based his claim on a defined Argument Selection Principle. The quote follows: “In predicates with grammatical subject and object, the argument for which the predicate entails the greatest number of Proto-Agent properties will be lexicalized as the subject of the predicate: the argument having the greatest number of Proto-Patient entailments will be lexicalized as the direct object [Dowty 1991:576](p. 99). Butt also lists Dowty’s proto-role entailments (pp. 98–99).

Butt says that Kiparsky’s theory of linking and case is a combination of insights from generative grammar and Panini’s ancient ideas about the relationship between case and thematic roles. She begins her very thorough description and illustration of Kiparsky’s theory by stating: “The theory postulates that there are three equally privileged components which determine the syntactic function of an argument: case, agreement and position. Kiparsky’s theory focuses explicitly on the role of case marking in identifying grammatical relations and thus stands in stark contrast to the generative tradition” (pp. 100-101).

According to Butt, Lexical Functional Grammar separates facts about linear word order from the “functional” analysis of a clause. Word order and constituency are represented at c(onstituent)-structure via the familiar tree representations. The f(unctional)-structure is represented in terms of an attribute-value matrix (AVM) and encodes functional syntactic information about grammatical relations, tense/aspect, case, number, person, etc.

In Chapter 6 Butt has carefully organized and discussed issues that frequently cause confusion and controversy in relation to languages that have been classified as ergative. She discusses the terminology including the earlier misunderstanding and application of the term “ergative”. She then presents the standard conception of ergativity, including morphological vs. syntactic ergativity and split ergativity. Finally, she introduces her summary of the chapter by saying: “As should be evident from the above discussion, there is no one coherent approach to ergativity. A number of ideas and standard hypotheses have been formulated over the years which serve as guiding principles for new analyses…There are a myriad of differences with respect to factors such as case realization, verb agreement and verbal morphology, coordination and discourse structure (topic/focus)… However, none of the analyses formulated so far can claim to account for the full range of ergative phenomena” (p. 172).

In Chapter 7, The Semantics of Case, Butt describes Localist Theories and case in relation to agentivity and affectedness with a particular emphasis on Wierzbecka’s work. She also discusses object and subject alternations with reference to linguists who associate these alternations with semantic concepts, including some differences in languages that are related to aspectual boundedness. In her final discussion of the issues in this chapter, she states: “Case alternations
have mainly been discussed from a morphosyntactic perspective. Semantic factors have often been tied to information about thematic roles (e.g. agents vs. patients vs. experiencers), but there is very little literature which attempts to explore the phenomenon from a primarily semantic point of view. The semantic factors that have been identified are not well understood…As already mentioned, one relevant factor is connected to the discourse structure of a clause. There are indications that topicality and the focusing of an NP interact systematically with the case system of a language” (p. 199).

I personally believe that this is one of the most promising and critical areas for the study of the issues described and discussed in this book. All of the illustrative sentences used for the theoretical claims that are described and discussed in this book are isolated from their contexts. This, I believe, reflects linguists’ failure to recognize the relevance of speaker choices in discourse. This, of course, is not the author’s fault, and from time to time, she alludes to the need for more study in this area.

My experience as a field linguist studying two Austronesian-Philippine-type languages has shown me that a thorough analysis and understanding of discourse-pragmatic reference is necessary for understanding the interaction of semantic roles, grammatical relations, and linear ordering. This understanding comes only with the study and analysis of the structuring of sentences in larger contexts.

Chapter 8, More Theories Great and Small, wraps up the book. In this chapter, Butt describes and discusses Role and Reference Grammar and Optimality Theory. She says that RRG, which has a detailed linking theory, was inspired by Fillmore’s Case Grammar. The theory rejects versions of X′-Theory as assumed by GB/MP, LFG and other linking theories which she presented in an earlier chapter. The theory also rejects the universal applicability of grammatical relations, and instead postulates macroroles and a concept of a privileged syntactic argument.

Butt acknowledges that Optimality Theory was first developed as a phonological theory. She then lists three papers that were instrumental in the application of OT to syntax:

An Optimality-Theoretic Typology of Case and Grammatical Voice Systems by Geraldine Legendre, Yoshiro Miyata, and Paul Smolensky, Optimal Syntax by Joan Bresnan and Optimal Subjects and Subject Universals by Jane Grimshaw and Vieri Samek-Lodovici. A very brief summary of Butt’s discussion of OT syntax is as follows: “Within OT, the goal is to determine an optimal output (surface form) with respect to a given input. The optimal output is picked from a set of candidates that compete with one another. The competition between the candidates is resolved by an evaluation of constraint violations…Crosslinguistic variation is accounted for by the relative ranking of constraints in each language: constraints are universally applicable, but in some languages they may not be strong enough to ever have an effect” (pp. 213–215).
I am incredibly impressed with the breadth of theories understood and discussed by Butt. She has read widely and processed the material in such a way as to make it uncommonly accessible. I recommend the book for your reference library, whether you are a field linguist or a grammar teacher. It could even serve as a good textbook choice for any grammar teacher who surveys morphosyntactic theory.